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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the financial support of libraries in general, and encourages information professionals to do more to communicate the value of libraries and library services to politicians and others involved in the distribution of public funds. Nineteen references are cited. (FM)

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LIBRARIES: A VALUE JUDGEMENT

Paper to be given at the ASLIB/IIS/LA Joint Conference. Sheffield 15-19 September 1980

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Author's note

At the request of the organizers this paper was prepared in June 1980. It therefore reflects the position as I saw it at that time.

I will begin by sharing a small secret with you. In the very pleasant letter I received inviting me to contribute to this conference, the organizer wrote:- "the ... planning committee hope that I can persuade you to talk about making the library pay". In my reply, I said that I would like to slightly re-work the topic and would prefer to talk to a different title. I should add that my requests were readily agreed to.

My concern at the title "Making the library pay" was really one of emphasis. It seemed to me to imply that libraries were not paying their way at the moment. This, as I hope to show, is simply not true. I suspect also that somewhere at the back of my mind was a thought that on the fourth day of an intensive conference, my title might somehow be misconstrued as 'paying for the library'. Not my favourite topic - but more of that later.

I am not, however, going to avoid economic questions. Indeed for the purposes of this paper it is essential to set the library service in its economic context. One of our leading organizational theorists, D. R. Weeks, has written:-

> "the economic climate is both a constraint on, and, a consequence of, an organization's activities". (1)

Now all of us spend a significant amount of time discussing the constraints placed on library organizations by the economic climate created by the present government. It is right that we should do so - but we should be equally vocal about the

effect of library and information organizations on the nation's economic and social health.

The raw materials of our trade - information and ideas are valuable, indeed vital, national resources. The economic value of libraries in providing information which improves technical know-how, increases productivity, directs the user to commercial opportunity, aids and prevents duplication in research, is not to be discarded lightly simply because it is difficult to measure.

Libraries also have an economic value as employers of labour, not just in the public sector but also in the numerous areas of private employment that depend on libraries for their own livelihoods. The economic health of publishers, binders and many other organizations is affected by the state of library services.

The benefits of libraries are not so much immediately visible in direct cash terms but in the improved performance of individuals, in increased initiative and in the increased reserves of a nation's intellectual energy. Expenditure on libraries, far from being a liability, is an investment offering substantial dividends to the community at large. The value of this kind of investment was recognized nearly half a century ago by Professor Tawney in his classic book Equality:-

"The manufacturer or mine-owner, whose establishment is staffed with workers who, after being prevented from dying in infancy by the public health service, educated

in public elementary schools, and taught their craft in the municipal college of technology, [are housed in buildings erected with the aid of a subsidy from the State, maintained during sickness and unemployment ... and paid their old-age pensions through the Post Office ...] may continue to believe, with the romanticism of his kind, that his profits are created solely by his personal intelligence, initiative, thrift, and foresight. But, as a mere matter of prosaic fact, the State is a partner in his enterprise, whose contribution to its success is at least as important as his own." (2)

A similar theme has been taken up by modern economists. T. W. Schultz, for example, has written of

> "the acquisition of knowledge and skills that have economic value"

and states

> "This knowledge and skill are in great part the product of investment and ... account for the productive superiority of the technically advanced countries. To omit them in studying economic growth is like trying to explain Soviet ideology without Marx." (3)

There is then a link between investment in education and information services and economic efficiency.

I am not, when talking to an audience of librarians, going to itemize the many ways that libraries contribute to the continuing and life-long process of education - but I would ask a wider audience to carefully consider just what would be the quality of our education without libraries. More, I would ask them to contemplate the quality of life in a society without library and information services.

As the nation faces, among other things, increasing unemployment, rising prices and the challenges of the new technology, the economic and social value of libraries will increase. Moreover, at a time when individuals and groups are having to take more and more important decisions, there can be no more crucial function than the communication of information and ideas. At the recent White House Conference on Libraries, President Carter expressed the opinion that

> "instant access to information and the calm and reasoned guidance of a qualified librarian can make the difference between the success and failure even of a life". (4)

Libraries are then a vital national and personal resource, but like other national resources, their full value can only be realized if there is adequate - and that means increased - investment in them. The major part of this investment has to come from the public purse. This is not to undervalue the contribution that the private sector can make, but simply to recognize that a task as complex and important as the

management and distribution of the nation's store of information and ideas can only be effectively achieved on the basis of collective funding.

We must, through our professional associations and trade unions, give the lie to the populist notion that collectively funded services are somehow inferior to those provided by private companies. It is just not so. Even the most ferocious advocates of private enterprise do not suggest that provision for law and order or national security should be left to the private sector. Only a few would opt for a health service or education system left to the mercies of the market place. Our services are just as vital for the maintenance of a democratic and civilized society.

It is perhaps more difficult to communicate the value of library services. They do not, at first glance appear to be concerned with questions of life and death. They are also notoriously difficult to evaluate. This presents a very real challenge at a time when we have an administration that appears to feel that nothing is of use unless it can be measured - preferably in terms of money.

Such a measure may be of use in assessing the progress of profit oriented organizations, it is far less significant when considering public service institutions. One of the current problems facing librarians and other public servants is that the government and also, I am afraid, some within the profession, seem to want to impose inappropriate commercial models on services provided via the public sector. Those who

seek to model public services on private sector organizations are not comparing like with like.

The B.L.R&D report Information services in the market place demonstrates the difference between the public and private provision of information. It is a revealing document. In it some practitioners actually advocate that free information services be opposed because when they are introduced commercial information organizations have to close down! In a significant passage, the report states

> "several respondents intended to move up market ... away from basic information work". (5)

The report does not deal at all with community information - presumably a down market activity.

For the private sector the main aim is profit not the provision of services to meet information or other needs. The private information industry is concerned about the dissemination of information in the same way that the drug companies are concerned about curing the ill - or estate agents care about the homeless. In the final analysis the objectives of the public and private sectors are quite different. In addition, while there are obvious overlaps, there are also significant differences between the two client groups. This is perhaps particularly true of information services.

Let me emphasize the words "public" and "service". In recent years some politicians and their press allies have sought to make public service and public expenditure terms of abuse.

Public servants are reviled as a group and public expenditure is blamed for the nation's economic ills. We must play our part in putting a stop to this.

First we must do more to communicate the value of public service to our own communities. Our particular task is not helped by those within the library profession who sell themselves and their colleagues short by reiterating the prejudices purveyed by the populist press. In a recent piece entitled, 'Paying for the library service' [you will begin to see why I was concerned about talking to a similar title!] a former chief librarian wrote of public library services as being "cosily rate-supported at all times without any need for personal initiative".(6) That is simply nonsense.

No personal initiative(!)? It would be invidious to name individuals, but each of us could draw up a long list of librarians who have transformed services through personal initiative. I refer not just to the great names, but to lesser known individuals who have instigated ideas at the local level. The author of the article could name people too - but he sees fit to promulgate and perpetuate the public service myth - and in a journal read by politicians and administrators.

We must also avoid the abrogation of professional values for political expediency. The other day I came across the Annual Report of an authority which had better remain nameless.

In this the librarian thanked the staff for "their quiet and responsible acceptance of the reductions in services which, however unwelcome, were seen to be unavoidable in the existing economic situation". In my view the quiet acceptance of reductions in service is totally irresponsible. Even if the librarian concerned felt unable to take a positive stand against his political masters, he could surely have refrained from endorsing their action.

At its 1979 Annual General Meeting members asked that the Library Association seek active co operation with organizations campaigning against public expenditure cuts. I am assured that such action has been carried out but, by and large as a profession, we have been too genteel in our approach. The economist J. K. Galbraith has advised librarians to

> "let any politician who attacks public employees as a class know where you and your friends stand ... you must, to the very best of your ability make public servants in general and librarians in particular seem dangerous". (7)

Galbraith is urging us to be dangerous in the political sense - but conventional wisdom tells us that far from endangering a politician's chances of success, attacking public servants and public expenditure would positively enhance them. Conventional wisdom can be wrong. Fifteen months or so ago I expressed the view

> "that over the next few years as ordinary working people begin to see the ... results of Thatcherite policies public opinion will become far more willing to support

the kind of collective financing that a caring society requires" (8)

There are, I think, some indications that this is beginning to happen.

It would, of course, be foolish to read too much in to one set of election results, but this year's local elections were undeniably a test of public opinion. In this city (Sheffield) the whole council was up for election and the ruling party had raised rates by 40%. The issue was clear, rate increases or a reduction in the level of public services. The campaign was fought on these lines. The local paper reporting in April:-

"Sheffield Conservatives have launched their local election campaign with a cry against high rates and a confident belief in their chances of success".(9)

In the event Labour gained four seats from the Tories while just down the road in Barnsley, the Labour Party won six seats from "Ratepayer" opposition.

Much the same pattern was reported elsewhere in the country. If public opinion was so much against public expenditure, one would have, at least, expected some swing against the rate increasing authorities. The message would appear to be that people are willing to support in a very real way the provision of services that they value.

The only alternative explanation of the results that I heard was that the Labour vote was that of council tenants who did not realize that they paid rates. A view frankly that

is not only insulting to the intelligence of council tenants but to anyone else who is expected to take it seriously.

There is also further evidence which indicates particular public support for library services. Before the General Election, surveys carried out for the BBC and the Daily Mail (Table 1) showed that people thought public libraries above all public services gave value for the rates.

SLIDE 1

TABLE 1

Which service does your local authority give good or bad value in?

Libraries	84% for
	16% against
Schools	63%
	37%
Rubbish coll.	73%
	27%
lighting	71%
	29%
Parks	64%
	36%
Housing	59%
	41%
Sports facil.	49%
	51%

Source: Daily Mail, Moneymail
25 April 1979

This does not mean that we should take public support for granted, we must continue to seek it and to channel it. At a time when library services are facing increasing competition for decreasing public funds, there is an urgent need for vocal public suppport. We require an effective library lobby to communicate the value of libraries to politicians and other holders of the public purse. It is a matter for regret that such a lobby does not exist in Britain at either the national or local level. This is in strict contrast to the quite major lobbies that have been established to put the case for "the arts" and sport. Two areas of activity which are often in competition with libraries for local authority funding.

A little late in its history the Library Association is beginning to recognize the importance of public relations and promotional activities. It has recently set up sub committees to deal with P.R. and parliamentary matters. These are steps in the right direction, but what the Association really needs is a full-time public relations office. For a profession that is concerned with the communication of information and ideas, we have been far too reticent in communicating information about the value of our own activities. The American Library Association, which has been both active and successful in the public relations field, currently has a multi-media campaign which proclaims the library to be "America's greatest bargain".

(SLIDE 2)

It would, of course, be foolish to suggest that a public relations campaign would put an end to all our financial

problems. Though there are some notable examples of public relations oriented librarians achieving significant success in budget negotiations. In addition, a recent report from the United States suggests that

> "libraries that engage in public relations activities ... show higher public support as evidenced by a higher budget allocation than libraries who do not engage in public relations activities." (10)

In advocating that we do more to communicate the value of libraries, I am not suggesting that libraries cannot be made more effective - even more cost effective. There is some room for improvement in most organizations be they private or public. However, there is to my knowledge, no conclusive evidence to suggest that public enterprises are any less effective than private ones. They are, however, more visible.

We must therefore make sure that our organizations are effective and that they are seen to be effective. I deliberately use the word effective rather than efficient. Efficiency is about cost, but effectiveness is about value. In libraries, as in other service organizations, user needs are not necessarily best served by efficiency alone. Thus in trying to make our libraries more effective, we should beware of "solutions" that concentrate on cost alone. Solutions that appear particularly tempting when times are hard. At the moment there is a grave danger that in attempting to solve short-term problems, the profession will adopt measures that will reduce the future effectiveness of library and information services.

Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the debate about library charges. Many of us feel that by allowing charges for records, pictures and so forth, public libraries have already gone some way down the slippery slope that leads to direct charges being imposed on users of other services. We have already heard demands to charge individuals for the use of on-line information services. A recent statement from the Library Association[11] offers some welcome guidance on this matter though I do not think that the distinction between the provision of information by new and traditional methods is a real one in terms of the charges debate.

I have developed this view elsewhere[12] but suffice it to say that the imposition of direct charges will withdraw the right of information from many citizens. In particular it will withdraw it from those in society who are already vulnerable for social, economic and other reasons. The right to information must be protected. In the words of the National Consumer Council:-

> "the other rights of citizenship are worth little without the right to education and information" [13]

If user fees were to become the norm, the information poor would become poorer still.

The arguments about charges are well known and there is no need to rehearse them in front of a professional audience. The Library Association has a clear policy on public library charges[14] and it behoves us as professionals to support

and promulgate this. Direct charges are not a way of making libraries pay in either a social or an economic sense. The economics of charging have been closely examined in a recent report to the Association of County Councils Recreation Committee. This states "the most efficient and economic way of paying for the (library) service is by way of the rates and taxes rather than through any form of separate charge".(15)

Some have suggested that 'public libraries "go into business" '.(16) The types of business suggested range from supplying industry with library and information services on a fee paying basis to the marketing of local studies publications and other artefacts. Tempting ideas and some of them, I suppose, reasonable enough in moderation. The danger in such revenue raising activities is that they will be provided at the expense of other more socially valuable ones. Technical information at the expense of community information for example.

Recently we have also seen imaginative attempts to introduce commercials and video games into libraries, and although I am not a great lover of advertizing, I suppose few would object to the occasional advertizement on the back of a bookmark or carrier bag. There are too some fund raising activities that we can learn from the United States - some of which - if I may introduce a commercial of my own - are indicated in my forthcoming book on library public relations.(17)

These and other activities may raise some money, but we are

fooling ourselves and our public if we suggest that we can make great inroads into the net cost of providing adequate library services. That cost is, in any case, not high. On the basis of the CIPFA public library statistics[18] I estimate that, on average, the public library service costs each individual in Great Britain about 1¼ pence per day. Not a bad bargain and one that benefits the individual user and the nation as a whole.

We should perhaps do more to show the public and politicians just how much they receive for their money. A recent Annual Report from Cheshire Public Library in Connecticut does this in a very positive way. The text compares the cost to individuals of purchasing the materials and services they used in a year to the cost of their contribution to the collective funding of the public library. Each service is itemized in these terms and the report concludes:-

> "Mr. and Mrs., Miss and Ms. Cheshire we gave you a $86.75 return on a $5.38 investment. Your library is a money saving institution".

Simple and very effective.

If we can't dramatically reduce the relatively low cost of library services, can we increase their value? I believe we can, but in the short-term that will mean increasing our investment in them. We know that our present library resources are not sufficient for current let alone future needs. We have only to look at School Library provision - or the lack of it - to see that. Our present state of

knowledge only allows us to guess what of value will have been lost to future generations because today's children are being deprived of adequate education and information resources.

Within our library services how much of value in terms of latent skill and professional potential is being lost because we are not investing in staff training and personnel services? Training budgets are all too often the target for cuts. Yet in the long run such cuts are a false economy because they mean library organizations and their clients are served by staff who are less effective than they could or should be.

To fail to invest in library and information services is more than bad management - it is an act of criminal folly. It is an act that will impede the intellectual, social, and economic development of this country. We should not be fooled by those who say we can't afford to make this investment. The truth is, that if we are to survive as a civilized nation, we cannot afford not to make it.

Of course the value of library services cannot be established in such a precise way as their cost. We know the cost of a book, a periodical subscription, or an on-line search, but we cannot know in advance their value to present or future users.

There is a growing literature on the economics of information and knowledge and although I have quoted a number of economists I have not attempted a microeconomic or macroeconomic analysis.

In stressing the value of libraries, rather than their cost, I am, I admit, partly indulging in an act of faith - but not blind faith. In the end though, I think I would rather be thought of as a professional believer than a professional cynic. Those of you who know your Oscar Wilde will recall that a cynic is "a man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing".[19]

Let us avoid that fate. Of course we must be concerned about prices and costs, but let us not spend so much time counting the obvious that we fail to see what is significant about our profession. Above all let us proclaim loud and clear our belief that in our library services we have something of value.

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